

Singh, D. P., (26 Sept. 2021). An Eminent Sikh Historian and Profound Scholar of Religion
- Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon, *Sikh Philosophy Network*, Chandigarh, India.
<https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/an-eminant-sikh-historian-and-profound-scholar-of-religion-dr-balwant-singh-dhillon.52137/>

An Eminent Sikh Historian and Profound Scholar of Religion - Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon



Interviewed by
Dr. Devinder Pal Singh

Center for Understanding Sikhism, Mississauga, L5A 1Y7, ON, Canada

Prof. (Dr.) Balwant Singh Dhillon, a much-acclaimed Sikh-historian, a dedicated researcher, a prolific writer, and a profound scholar of religion, was born in 1950, at Village Ran Singh Wala, District Faridkot, Punjab, India. With his keen interest in learning, he received B.A. degree from SGGGS College, Chandigarh, in 1972, and an M.A. (History) degree from the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur in 1974. During his younger days, he nurtured a keen interest in sports. On attaining the National Level Athlete ranking, he was enthusiastic about pursuing a career in sports. Thereby, he joined Master Course for Coaching in athletics at the National Institute of Sports, Patiala, in 1974. Herein, he came in contact with Prof. Labh Singh of the Institute of Sikh Studies (IOSS, now Gurmat College), who inspired him to take up Sikh studies. This interaction brought a sea change in his life motive, and he committed himself to pursue a career in Sikh studies.

After receiving M.A. (Religious Studies) degree from the IOSS in July 1976, he joined M. Lit. (Religious Studies) course at Punjabi University, Patiala. Here he had the opportunity to learn from several eminent scholars, e.g., Prof. Harbans Singh, Prof. Gurbachan Singh Talib, Prof. L.M. Joshi, and Dr. A.N. Sinha, etc., which made his resolve steadfast. In January 1977, he

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joined the Department of Guru Nanak Studies at Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar, to pursue his research activities for a Ph.D. degree. In March 1985, he was awarded with a Ph. D. degree by GNDU, for his outstanding research work on "The Sikh Gurus and the Mughal State." Starting, in April 1979, as a Research Assistant at the Department of Guru Nanak Studies, he rose to the position of Professor and Head of the department. He retired in June 2010. During his tenure at the university, he had also served as Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Religious Studies, Senator and Syndic of the University.

During his tenure as Head, Department of Guru Nanak Studies, he played a vital role in starting the teaching of M.A. (Religious Studies and Philosophy) at GNDU, Amritsar. Under his stewardship, the research projects on "Sikh Religion and Philosophy," "Sikh History," and "Sikh Literature" were taken up, which led to a research and development grant of Rs. 3.2 Million from U.G.C., New Delhi, during 2006-2011. Dr. Dhillon was instrumental in establishing the Centre on Studies in Sri Guru Granth Sahib at the university, in April 2011, and served as its founding Director till February 2015. He has also served as the Editor-in-Chief for reputed Sikh research journals, "*Journal of Sikh Studies*" and "*Perspectives on Guru Granth Sahib*," published by the GNDU.

In his forty years long professional career, he is credited with the authoring/publishing about a dozen books and over 100 articles in various research journals, books, and encyclopedias. Besides chairing several international seminars/conferences, he played a vital role in organizing many such events at the Department of Guru Nanak Studies and Centre on Studies in Guru Granth Sahib. He has the honor of representing India at many conferences/seminars within Canada, America, England, Germany, and Australia.

With his continuous dedication to religious studies, he has established himself as an exponent of interfaith dialogue and an eminent writer in the field of Sikh history. Through his well researched and analytic writings, he has created an indelible mark of scholarship on his readers' minds. For his outstanding contributions in the fields of Sikh history and literature, he has been honored by several literary and social organizations.

Despite his great love and commitment to Sikh History and Religion, Dr. Dhillon subscribes to the idea that Sikh Gurus' Philosophy is perennial and universal in its approach to

understand cosmology, Nature, life, and human behavior in the present era. Furthermore, He asserts that the Sikh Gurus' ideology, its beliefs and practices, social order, worldview, and devotional pattern, as propounded in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, address the basics befitting the 21st century. His views on various aspects of Sikh history and philosophy are presented here for the benefit of readers.

Dr. Singh: Dr. Dhillon! In your younger days, you were an excellent athlete and even scored well in National level Athletics. Thereby you were striving to take up sports as a professional career, then how did you become a Sikh historian?

Dr. Dhillon: After completion of my matriculation, I joined a rural college for further studies. There I found my natural talent as a javelin thrower, but there was no coaching facility available. So, I moved to Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh. Here I received my Bachelor's degree in 1972. After that, I joined University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, to pursue M.A. (History) studies. Unfortunately, I missed my first class by a fraction because an examiner awarded me fewer marks in viva-voce than I had scored in writing. I realized that it was due to my identity. Internally, a Sikh in me had awakened. It was the beginning of my quest. After finishing my Master in History, being an old student in May 1974, I visited Principal Gurbux Singh Shergill in Guru Gobind Singh College at Chandigarh. I disclosed to him that I am interested in research on Sikh history. Principal Shergill was kind enough and told me that he would go to Punjabi University, Patiala, and accompany him the next day. He will help me to explore the possibilities of my research there. Having participated in a meeting in Guru Gobind Singh Bhawan, Principal Shergill took me to the Department of History and introduced me to Prof. Fauja Singh and requested him to take me into his wings. Prof. Fauja Singh was generous enough and asked me which area I would like to pursue my research. I said that the theme of the Sikh-Rajput relationship fascinates me. Prof. Sahib asked a couple of questions to test my knowledge and understanding. After that, he advised me to read more critically the source material, and after that, I may revisit him. After meeting Prof. Fauja Singh, I realized that I need

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to upgrade my understanding of Sikh history and religion. Till then, half-heatedly, I was striving for a career in sports.

In July 1974, I had got admission to the National Institute of Sports at Patiala for a Master's Course in athletics. One day by chance, while walking on a road behind the Institute, I noticed a board of the Institute of Sikh Studies (now Gurmat College) which specialized in teaching and research on Sikh Studies. It attracted me, and the next day during the working hours, I visited the Institute to inquire about what type of Sikh Studies it offers. I introduced myself to Prof. Labh Singh, a very dedicated teacher. After discussion with him, I felt that this is a good Institute for up-gradation of knowledge in Sikh studies. So, I asked the Professor can I get admission to this Institute? On looking at my trimmed beard, Prof. Labh Singh retorted that only Amritdhari students are admitted, and in case I agree to follow the Khalsa code of conduct, then I could be considered. I gave my consent and promised to abide by the rules. The next day he took me to S. Narain Singh, Chairman/President of the Management of Gurmat College. He explained to him my request, who in return asked me a few questions regarding daily *Nitnem* and my efficiency in the sacred Sikh literature. Anyway, he agreed to take me on probation and allowed my admission. It is all about how I left a career in sports and got initiation into Sikh Studies.

Dr. Singh: "The Sikh Gurus and the Mughal State" was the topic of your research for your doctoral studies. Can you share a few of your prominent findings of this interrelationship?

Dr. Dhillon: My experience of research for Ph. D. was not a pleasant one. However, I relied upon moral courage and strong willpower and took it in my strides. Anyway, the topic was very fascinating and very significant as well. Before taking up the core issue, it looks into the relationship between religion and politics in ancient and medieval India. First, it enquires into the beliefs, practices, and social order that had a retrograde effect on developing reasoned philosophy of human rights besides social mobility. Then this study traces out circumstances leading to the establishment of Mughal rule in India, its religious and agrarian policies, the patronization of Islam and its culture, the role of Muslim religious classes, and their influence upon the Mughal rulers. After that, it enquires into the Guru Nanak's attitude towards politics in

general and towards the Muslim and Mughal rulers in particular. We find that, unlike many of the Hindu Bhagats and Muslim Sufis, Guru Nanak had not forfeited his right to criticize and comment upon contemporary polity. By charging Babur for his inhuman treatment meted out to the defenseless people, Guru Nanak had set the tone and tenor of a citizen's right to protest against the oppressive state. Then step by step, this study traverses the development of Sikhism under the successors of Guru Nanak and takes note of Emperor Akbar's liberal and friendly outlook, which had provided a pleasant atmosphere for the Sikh Panth to develop into a pan Indian movement. Despite that, the Sikh Gurus had to face opposition at the hands of orthodox elements, both Hindus and the Muslims, provincial-level Mughal officials, and the dissenters within Sikh Panth. Emperor Jahangir was disillusioned to see the spread of Sikhism and desired to stop it or bring Guru Arjan to the fold of Islam. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606 at the hands of the Mughal Emperor had made it clear that the era of co-existence is over, and the future of Sikh Panth as a religious community was in severe danger.

Guru Hargobind's response to the crisis in the form of Miri-Piri was an attempt to determine once for all that in Sikh Panth, social concerns are inseparable from its religion. To provide an institutional basis to the doctrine of Miri-Piri, Guru Hargobind went on to establish the Akal Takht, suggesting that Sikh Panth is sovereign in its right to decide about its social and religious issues. We find that spread of Sikhism was sore in the eyes of Aurangzeb. He wanted to put his faithful or protégé on the seat of Guruship. He had asked Guru Tegh Bahadur to renounce his claim of Miri-Piri and desired him to live like a Fakir. He was highly perturbed over the mass following of the Ninth Guru and wanted to extract a promise of faithfulness towards him. Aurangzeb's policy of enforced conversion into Islam was a serious threat to the multi-cultural character of Indian society. For all these reasons, Guru Tegh Bahadur had courted martyrdom at the altar of his faith. The last section of this study discusses in detail the mission of Guru Gobind Singh, the creation of Khalsa, and his doctrine of use of force in the cause of righteousness.

We observe that the 'House of Nanak' and the 'House of Babur' were two contemporary but distinct entities in their character and outlook. The Sikh Gurus always stood for the sovereignty of Sikhism ingrained in the doctrine of Miri-Piri. In contrast, the Mughal Emperors being despot had laid exclusive claim over the temporal authority. The relationship between the

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two fluctuated from time to time. Beginning with Jahangir, all the Mughal emperors were not well inclined towards the spread of Sikhism. They looked upon it as a potential threat to the Mughal empire. Thus, political misgivings about the mission of the Sikh Gurus coupled with the puritan agenda on the part of Mughal Emperors were the chief factors that had brought them to the point of a clash. Though the Mughal Empire has collapsed long ago and is only a matter of academic interest for historians, the Sikh Panth has gone from strength to strength to make its presence felt worldwide. History is a witness to the simple fact that true religion can outlive a mighty empire, an example well represented by Sikhism in its relation to the Mughal Empire.

Dr. Singh: In your book, *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition Myth and Reality*, you have addressed several issues that arose from the textual studies of the Sikh Scripture. What were these contentious issues concerning the formation of the Sikh canon?

Dr. Dhillon: Academically, *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition Myth and Reality* was a challenging task. It examines the hypothesis that originated with Dr. W.H. McLeod in 1975 that there may be an exemplar on which Guru Arjan had worked to produce the Adi Granth. He had initiated a debate that the Text of Sikh Scripture is not original. Later on, one of his students in the 1990s went on to establish this hypothesis into a thesis. His principal findings were that he had unearthed an earlier draft of the Adi Granth prepared by Bhai Gurdas under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan. It is the same one that the Fifth Master had worked on to produce the Adi Granth in 1604. The formulations and suppositions were that (i) the history of the text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib is not clear and its text is not authentic (ii) Guru Arjan had revised the *bani* of Guru Nanak, and has modified his hymns also, (iii) *Mul-Mantra* is not as it has undergone a series of changes, (iv) the writings of the Bhagats have been in and out of the Sikh Scripture, (v) the version produced by Guru Arjan in 1604 continued to be tampered with and it was Maharaja Ranjit Singh who took upon himself to establish the standard version of the Sikh Scripture. The above findings were superficial and without any credible evidence. Secondly, the internal evidence of the Pothis pointed to the contrary. Obviously, it resulted in an unsavory controversy and acrimonious debate. Meanwhile, Professor Piar Singh had also authored his controversial book, which included studies on the so-called earlier sources, including MS#1245. These

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startling findings aroused my curiosity to examine the manuscript in question, the so-called 'Earlier Draft', in detail.

To examine the authenticity of the so-called 'Earlier Draft,' there was an academic vacuum. Subsequently, I studied it minutely and found that it can never pass on the 'Early Draft of the Adi Granth' test. It contains numerous Kachi-bani compositions even attributed to Guru Arjan. Moreover, in the colophon, it carried the death date (1663 Bk /1606 CE) of Guru Arjan recorded in the hand of the primary scribe with the same pen and shade of ink. I shared my write-up with Prof. (Dr.) Noel Q. King of UCL, Santa Cruz, for feedback and response. Later on, in 1994, it appeared in *Abstracts of Sikh Studies* under the title of 'Myth of an Early Draft of Adi Granth.' The response was overwhelming. Prof. King advised me to study the other manuscripts, namely *Guru Har Sahai Pothis* and *Goindwal Pothis*, in a similar manner. Based on internal evidence, I found that these so-called earliest sources belong to different traditions of Gurbani. They are in no way ancestral to the Adi Granth, and to ascribe the name of Guru Arjan and Bhai Gurdas with the production of Ms#1245 is absolutely wrong and patently insincere. My analysis of these so-called earlier sources resulted in *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition Myth and Reality*, published by the Singh Brothers in 2000.

Dr. Singh: How have you been able to examine and analyze these issues? What are your recommendations for the resolution of such problems in the future?

Dr. Dhillon: I approach this issue with an open mind and a critical outlook. From the times of Guru Nanak to the final canonization of Sikh Scripture by Guru Gobind Singh in 1706, there is a considerable gap of time. In between, the Sikhs of various hues had produced several manuscripts primarily to preserve and transmit *bani* in their own manner. Every manuscript had a purpose and use made of it. Therefore, one needs to look into the claim of a custodian of a Pothis carefully and critically. The most critical issue is that what the Pothis speak for itself. For it, internal evidence holds the key.

The history of Sikh scriptural tradition confirms that various modes and traditions had come to exist for its preservation and transmission. One needs to be careful about Kachi-bani written under the pen name of Nanak. The Schismatic groups within the Panth had

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commissioned their scribes. Therefore, every manuscript of *Gurbani* should not be taken as a genuine product of mainstream Sikhism. To examine any manuscript, I have worked on three AAA formula. Before considering the evidence of any document, one needs to establish its Antiquity (dating). Secondly, the Authority, i.e., who authored it and what was its source and purpose. Finally, Authenticity, the validity or veracity of the claim. My advice to the scholars is that don't indulge in the fabrication of evidence as it may boomerang on your face. Freedom of expression carries moral responsibility; therefore, be honest in your statements and do not indulge in misstatements. Be generous to revise your mistakes in case you have ever committed an error. Do not fear or hesitate to question the tradition if you have unimpeachable evidence to defend your viewpoint.

Dr. Singh: Your two books, *Banda Singh Bahadur : Farsi Sarot* (2011), and *Rajasthani Documents on Banda Singh Bahadur* (2016) have widened the scope of research on the Sikhs' past beyond Punjab. These books emphasize the significance of Persian and Rajasthani sources in reconstructing the community's history. What new findings have you arrived at by examining and analyzing these documents about the renowned Sikh warrior Banda Singh Bahadur?

Dr. Dhillon: Banda Singh Bahadur, the founder of First Sikh Rule (May 1710-December 1715), was a unique Sikh personality. He had been a much-maligned and misunderstood personality. It was due to the highly prejudiced writings of Mughal chroniclers besides some unwarranted statements on the part of latter-day Sikh historians. Again, and again, the Arya Samajist historians have tried to appropriate his legacy as a Hindu ascetic. However, very little has been done during the last 50-60 years or so to unearth new source material. Both these books deal with new and contemporary source material in Persian and Rajasthani, which has remained ignored. Fortunately, as of now, we have enough eyewitness accounts in Persian and Rajasthani, which throw immense light on the varied aspects of the life, personality, and legacy of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur. *Banda Singh Bahadur: Farsi Sarot*, published in 2011, deals with twenty-one Persian chroniclers. Most of them were contemporary, and many of them were present on the battle scenes and were eyewitnesses to the saga of martyrdom in 1716 in Delhi. Though the Persian chroniclers, generally Muslims and court historians, refer to Baba Banda Singh in

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derogatory language, the evidence is incredible to reconstruct his persona. Evidence at hand suggests that he was an Amritdhari Sikh, and Guru Sahib had given him the name of Banda Singh. Revenge was not his motive, but he was against the tyrants. Neither was he against Islam, nor was he an enemy of the Muslims. Thousands of Muslims formed part of his army. He believed in the Khalsa Rahit and did not claim Guruship for himself. These Persian historians throw ample light on his administrative and agrarian reforms and enrich our knowledge about his military genius, warfare strategy, and social change that he had ushered in. ***Banda Singh Bahadur: Farsi Sarot*** is a most comprehensive study of the Persian historiography on Baba Banda Singh.

Rajasthani Documents on Banda Singh Bahadur (2016), ventures into an exciting discipline of Rajasthani sources that have remained unnoticed for writing Sikh history. Written in medieval Marwari/Rajasthani, these sources are found in archival form. Many of the documents present contemporary evidence on the eighteenth-century Sikh-Rajput and Sikh-Jat relationship. Since 1998, I have visited several times Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, and other public and private libraries and archives throughout Rajasthan. Fortunately, I have retrieved all the material dealing with eighteenth-century Sikh history. The book in question deals with the contemporary Rajasthani documents, which offer first-hand evidence on the Sikh struggle under his stewardship. The authors of these documents belonged to a rare breed of Vakils, representatives of the Rajput chiefs at the Mughal court. The Rajasthani documents reveal that Baba Banda Singh had thought of forming a Rajput–Sikh Alliance to overthrow the Mughal Empire, but it could not materialize. These documents are recorded in the medieval Rajasthani/Marwari language, which is very difficult to understand. Thus, an English rendering of them has been presented in chronological order. The Rajasthani documents, introduced for the first time, are beneficial to fill the gaps that we encounter in the history of the Sikh struggle against the Mughal Empire. Hopefully, it will open up new vistas to explore the new sources for writing Sikh history. I will be introducing another set of eighteenth-century Rajasthani documents that relate to the Sikh forays into Rajasthan.

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Dr. Singh: You are a Sikh historian by training and practice, yet you play a vital role in promoting interfaith dialogue. In 2005 you had edited and published a book titled: "Interfaith Study of Guru Granth Sahib." Let us know what interfaith dialogue is and the need for such a conversation in the present era?

Dr. Dhillon: Before the advent of Guru Nanak, India had a tradition of Dialogue known as *Shastararth*, which generally ended up in *Digvijay*. It was not a dialogue for interaction or exchange of ideas to enlighten each other but a debate to annihilate or reject the ideology of others. Very obviously, the purpose of present-day Interfaith Dialogue is not to reject or eliminate the other but to build a bridge for appreciation of each other's perspective. We find that at the advent of Guru Nanak, the Hindus and the Muslims were poles apart. Society was passing through a severe crisis of Trust Deficit. Guru Nanak began his mission on a radical call that 'There is no Hindu and no Musalmaan,' i.e., don't divide humanity in the name of religion. During his long journeys, he had interacted with a wide variety of religious leaders. It proves that he believed in dialogue and was a strong votary of co-existence. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, made the supreme sacrifice for the sake of religious freedom of worship, a fundamental right of any person. The Sikh Scripture includes the writings of the Hindu Bhagats and the Muslim Sufis, presents a living model of how we can adjust and live together.

Examples of religion as a tool to fan the sectarian animosities and communal rivalries are not uncommon. Recently, religion has been employed as an instrument for terrorism. Moreover, it has brought us to the threshold of a clash between civilizations. For the resolution of these types of conflicts, inter-faith understanding holds great merit. It can remove many of the misgivings that one community carries against another. Therefore, the Sikh religious leadership should participate in inter-faith conclaves, which would undoubtedly contribute to world peace.

Dr. Singh: Can you please cite any norm for interfaith dialogue? What are the likely pros and cons of such an exchange?

Dr. Dhillon: Guru Nanak had interacted with a wide variety of religious leaders. He undertook long journeys to reach out to the people of various hues and quickly established rapport with them. He employed very well his talent and skill in music to attract people. He had found that

love, friendship, sympathy, goodwill, compassion, forgiveness, etc., are the essential values for a fruitful dialogue. Guru Nanak discarded the communal approach as it had divided humanity in the name of religion. He suggested to them that instead of rejection and hostility, please recognize the diversity. He was not soliciting proselytization. Instead of it, he was advising them to be true to their respective faith. Guru Nanak's advice was that do not condemn others to glorify your faith. On being questioned by the Qazis of Mecca that tell them whether the Muslims are better or the Hindus? The Guru answered that both are liable for condemnation without good deeds.

Persons of high moral character committed to the cause of amity and goodwill can do wonders at interfaith gatherings. There are so many lessons that we can take from the experience and teachings of Guru Nanak. For example, he says that do not make fun and ridicule others. Rather than accusing others, an approach of patience, introspection, and self-examination is advisable. For the success of a dialogue, a congenial atmosphere is a prerequisite. A highly intense environment will not serve any purpose. Similarly, indulgence in arrogance is of no use in such gatherings. Instead, civilized mannerism holds the key. Be flexible in your attitude to accommodate the views of others and mind your language as it can make or break the relationship. Guru Nanak's visit to Multan and his subsequent symbolic interaction with the Sufis presents a fine example of inter-faith understanding. Perhaps the Sufis of Multan were not in the mood to hold a dialogue with the Guru. To convey their message to Guru Nanak, they welcomed him with a bowl full of milk, symbolizing that Multan is already full of Muslim divines and there is no need for him. Guru Nanak had very wisely put a petal of jasmine flower on its surface and send it back to them. The message was that he could accommodate himself in Multan without disturbing them. To convince others, one needs to follow a civilized and logical stance. Mutual understanding is the best way to establish rapport with others. Therefore, approach others with goodwill and sympathy and harvest respect, goodwill and acceptability in its return, which may be of immense help to resolve the contentious issues.

Dr. Singh: What are the challenges to interfaith dialogue in contemporary times?

Dr. Dhillon: Challenges to inter-faith dialogue are multiple and vary from country to country. Now the deliberations are not limited to spirituality alone. Rather all the issues on earth concerning humanity have come under its ambit. The avowed purpose is to resolve the conflict and coming together for the welfare of humankind. Interfaith Dialogue is a platform to know and understand different perspectives on critical issues. It facilitates bridging the gap through persuasion and mutual understanding. Here comes the challenge, i.e., visionary and knowledgeable religious leadership, which is hard to find. A Religious leader may be an excellent expert of his/her tradition but may not be well-versed in world economy and trade, politics, and issues such as climate change and international affairs. Pure and honest at heart, the religious leadership is not trained and made up for this type of assemblies. The participants may not be multi-linguists for want of which free flow of discussion and exchange of ideas is a tricky problem. Religious leadership carries only moral authority, but there is no mechanism/system to implement their decisions. Though all the world religions subscribe to the idea that ‘The Whole World is but one Family’ (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*), there is no end to social inequality sanctified by religion. Communal harmony, multi-culturalism, and co-existence are still a distant dream. Even the most advanced and developed countries are not free from hate crimes. Orthodox outlook is another stumbling block in genuine dialogue and inquiry. The emergence of right-wing authoritarianism and Supremacist groups has recently thrown up a new challenge to peace and harmony. Similarly, Majoritarianism sanctioned by democratic means coupled with State policy to impose cultural hegemony has created an environment of fear psychosis. All these factors have put a lot of stress upon Inter-faith understanding.

Dr. Singh: Though a committed exponent of Sikh History, you often elaborate on Sikh theology in print and e-media. The topics chosen by you for such endeavors are always radical. How does the Sikh community respond to your ventures?

Dr. Dhillon: The Sikhs had been victims of prejudiced and faulty writings on their history and religion. The Persian sources are full of hatred and derogatory remarks, whereas the early Europeans used to call them ‘Evil’ and ‘Plague.’ This trend has gone on unabated, but its nature

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has changed. When someone says that Guru Nanak's religion was 'a reworking of the Sant synthesis,' it puts a question mark on him as an original thinker. The remark that "the history of Sikh tradition begins too late and ends too early" is highly invalid as it creates doubt about the very origin of Sikhism. Several other issues, such as the Sikh Gurus, had nothing to do with the Sikh identity. It was amorphous and undefined; the Sikh code of conduct and identity is the handiwork of Singh Sabha; the Sikh tradition of martyrdom is mere a politics and so on. The right-wing scholars believe that Sikhism is a part of the Sanatan Hindu tradition; it is nothing more than a sect or cult of Hinduism. All these observations create doubt about the origin and characteristic features of Sikhism. These misconceptions are the result of the fallacious perception of Sikhism. For correct appreciation, one needs an accurate and thorough understanding of the primary Sikh sources. I feel Sikh scholarship should concentrate on articulating the Sikh viewpoint on these issues academically and logically.

For me, the discipline of Sikh studies is not only a profession but a passion and mission as well. You may call me a radical because I ask for credible/unimpeachable evidence; I do not rely upon hearsay nor subscribe to fabrication of evidence. My approach is purely academic and professional. Before using any document's evidence, I put it to rigorous scrutiny. For that, I follow an inter-disciplinary approach that is grounded in Sikh history, religion, and devotional literature. I am interested in searching the truth, nothing else, with total integrity and honesty, besides presenting it without any fear or hesitation. I have the honor to write entries on Sikh history and religion in Encyclopedias and books published by international publishing houses. So far, I have published more than fifteen books that academia has well-received worldwide. My book, *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition Myth and Reality*, was released over a seminar on March 16, 2000 in India by Dr. H.S. Soch, Vice-Chancellor, GND University, Amritsar; and in North America by Hon'ble Herb Dhaliwal, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada at an International Conference on Sikh Studies held at St. Antonio College, Walnut City (L.A.) on May 13, 2000. Response to it was tremendous and overwhelming. Prof. Wazir Singh wrote a review of it in the *Journal of Religious Studies*, Punjabi University, Patiala. Professor M.S. Ahluwalia, Dean Academics, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, presented a special report at an international conference on Devotional Literature in South Asia held at Leuven, Belgium

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August 2000. Even Dr. W.H. McLeod wrote to me that he enjoyed reading my book, presenting a different perspective. It was adjudged the best book on Sikh Studies by the Academy of Sikh Religion, Patiala, in 2000. For my commitment, dedication, and contribution towards Sikh Studies, in 2005, Punjab Government took me on the Board to decide the route of Guru Gobind Singh Marg; and in 2018, nominated me on the Expert Group to decide about the curriculum on history for Punjab School Education Board. I am a member of several Educational Societies and Research Institutions.

Dr. Singh: You are a noted expert in Sikh doctrines and comparative religious studies. As per your worldview, what is the meaning or purpose of our presence in this Universe?

Dr. Dhillon: World religions including Sikhism hold that human being is supreme among all the living creatures. Most of the Scriptures believe that besides a physical body, human beings possess an element called soul that belongs to the creative genius of God. It belongs to the core or interiority related to the conscience, enabling a person to realize/experience re-union with the Divine, which is the ultimate aim of human life. Moreover, human beings are conferred with a rare gift to distinguish between good and evil. The cosmic struggle between good and evil is going on. Human beings are supposed to stand up in the cause of righteousness.

Because of its special position, the human being stands in unique relation to the rest of the world. Humans may rule over the rest of the creatures, but their domination over the world does not mean unbridled freedom to exploit Nature. The rest of creation also has its intrinsic value. The Natural Laws that govern the World are Divine gifts. Human beings must respect these Laws if they want to live in peace and harmony in this world. The purpose of human life is to be at peace within himself and with God and live-in harmony with Nature.

Dr. Singh: In present times, Sikh doctrines and Sikh religious practices often appear at loggerheads. What is your opinion about it?

Dr. Dhillon: The modern age and cultural pressure have thrown a couple of challenges to the Sikh Panth. Some grey areas demand immediate attention. Of them, doctrinal erosion is a crucial issue that requires close attention. For example, the cult of the Sant Babas has grown up in size,

status and influence. They do not strictly follow the Sikh tenets and code of conduct. They indulge in ritualism and preach Sikhism in their own manner. Faithfulness or allegiance is not towards God but to the Babas in authority. The tradition of the congregational lifestyle is disappearing day by day. Though the Sikhs do not believe in society's segregation, there is a wedge among the Sikhs on caste, regional, urban, and rural factors. The Sikhs belonging to the so-called lower castes are living miserable life. Similarly, the involvement of women in the Sikh religious bodies and their participation in public is not proportionate to their numerical strength. The Punjab, where the majority of Sikhs live, has witnessed an alarming decrease in the sex ratio of female children. The integration and inclusion of the Dalits and women in the public life of the Sikhs are the real issues, which need resolution. One notice that apostasy among the Sikhs is on the rise. Young Sikhs are not enthusiastic about carrying religious symbols in public. The unique religious identity of the Sikhs has been misunderstood many a time. In some parts of the world, the Sikhs have experienced hate crimes. There are some countries where the law does not allow the Sikhs to wear a turban. Therefore, motivating the young Sikhs to observe the Sikh code of conduct and preserve their unique religious identity has become more complex.

Dr. Singh: Is the Sikh religion in conflict or harmony with science? How can the Sikhs help in the cultivation of scientific temper in society?

Dr. Dhillon: Religion is a matter of conscience, and thus it is a subject of realization (*Anubhav*). Secondly, the Sikh scripture is not a science book but delineates spiritual experience that belongs to the Wholly other domain, which is beyond reasoning. Till date, no postulate of the Sikh Scripture has been found contrary to the scientific findings. Sikhism stands for education and dissemination of knowledge. It desires its followers to be free from ignorance and blind faith, a stumbling block in the scientific temperament. Sikhism encourages the Sikhs to equip themselves with knowledge. Besides worldly education and expertise, it also goes further, which results in spiritual enlightenment. It helps the devotee to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, *Paap* and *Puniya*. etc. Constant contemplation on the Naam and self-examination or introspection at every step is prescribed for internal purity. It proves that scientific/rational

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temperament does not run contrary to the ideals of Sikhism. Its rational outlook ends up in spiritual enlightenment, which finds expression in the service and welfare of humanity.

Dr. Singh: Do the Sikh doctrines drive towards the sustainability of living beings on the earth?

Dr. Dhillon: Doctrinally, Sikhism stands for sustainability. It does not believe that the World is unreal (Maya). It is God's creation, and thus like a *Dharamsala* to live in and practice religion. Sikhism enjoins human beings to live in harmony with Nature. It ensures the preservation of biodiversity and Nature in its pristine purity. Sikhism is a life-affirming religion wherein householders' lifestyle and commitment to social concerns are equally important. It takes care of both the domains, *Deen* (spiritual) and *Duniya* (social-political), in equal measures. It is all-inclusive in its approach, which manifests in the welfare of humanity. In the Sikh ideology, religion is an instrument for the upliftment of society and humanity. Equal rights to all, including the subalterns, marginalized sections and women, are recommended. There is no monopoly of any caste on any profession. It is an all-inclusive approach that ensures social justice, participation, partnership in society.

Guru Nanak's social vision is the most suitable and practicable model for sustainability that he had put into practice while living in Kartarpur. To establish a new social order, he had established the institutions such as *Sangat*, *Langar* and *Dharamsala*, etc. He had evolved the congregational way of life embedded in the principles of *Kirat Karo*, *Naam Japo*, and *Wand Chhako*. The first one, *Kirat Karo*, asks everyone to engage him/herself in the productive activity i.e., earning livelihood by honest means. It promotes work culture and discourages dependence upon others. The second value, *Naam Japo*, stands for devotion to God through contemplation on *Naam*. It helps human beings to maintain internal purity amidst worldly temptations besides distinguishing between good and evil. The third, *Wand Chhako* norm, asks for sharing the fruits of labor with the less fortunate and needy. It relates to social responsibility and recommends an altruistic approach towards the welfare and development of society. Guru Nanak had propounded these three golden rules in those times when the modern concepts of the working-class, its rights, and the law to protect them from exploitation yet had not been conceived. Besides the above

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triad, selfless service (*Sewa*) was another essential feature of the Sikh way of life. Before Guru Nanak, menial labor was the duty of *Shudras*, but he alleviated it to the level of Divine worship. It was bound to enhance the value of dignity of work and hit hard at the stigma attached to menial work in Indian society. These are the essential ingredients for self-reliant and sustainable development anywhere in the world. It was a great effort aimed at the reconstruction of an ideal society. Implementation of this model may ensure the sustainability of living beings on the earth.

Dr. Singh: Recently, 'The Wire,' New Delhi has reported that Sikhs, in the U.S.A., will be counted as a distinct ethnic group for the first time in the 2020 census. What is your opinion; "Are Sikhs an ethnic group?"

Dr. Dhillon: The word 'Sikh' does not refer to any ethnicity/race but to a person who professes Sikhism. Moreover, Sikhism is not the religion of Punjabis and Jats of India alone. Anyone belonging to any race/ethnicity can embrace Sikhism. We find that out of conviction, so many people belonging to various religions, castes, professions, nationalities, ethnicities, countries have come into the fold of Sikhism. The character of Sikh society world over proves that the Sikhs do not belong to a single ethnic stock, race or, caste. If the followers of Christianity and Islam can be enumerated as Christians and Muslims, respectively, then the followers of Sikhism ought to be listed as the Sikhs.

Dr. Singh: What are the national and international challenges to the Sikh Identity during present times? What are the ways and means to successfully handle such issues to establish Sikhs' distinct identity worldwide?

Dr. Dhillon: Since its inception, Sikhism's doctrinal, sociological, and devotional boundaries were well-defined by Guru Nanak himself. His successors took forward his legacy without deviating from the marker underlined by him. With the creation of Khalsa in 1699, the Sikh identity had become more pronounced. Gurbani and the contemporary sources confirm that Sikhism was not an offshoot of any religion. Externally, bigoted Mughal rulers were against the spread of Sikhism, whereas the orthodox Hindus foresaw in it a threat to the Brahmanical social order. Internally, schismatic elements, namely, *Udasis*, *Minas*, *Dhirmalias*, *Hindalias*, *Ramraias*,

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Masandias, etc., for vested interest had indulged in diluting the originality of Sikhism. With the emergence of the Sikh ruling class, some un-Sikh-like practices had crept into the Sikh Panth. Over time, the Udasi *Mahants* managing the Sikh shrines had gone corrupt. Besides, they were not averse to follow Brahmanical practices. The Christian missionaries were working on an evangelical plan, whereas the Arya Samajists were interested in assimilating the Sikhs into the fold of Hinduism. The crisis was multi-pronged, and in response to it, Singh Sabha's leadership went on to educate and enlighten the Sikhs about the true spirit of Sikhism.

However, some modern-day scholars look upon the Singh Sabha as a struggle between *Tat Khalsa* and *Sanatan Sikhi*. Actually, there is no *Sanatan Sikhi* as Sikhism has its historical origin in the doctrinal, sociological, and devotional expression authenticated by Guru Nanak and his successors. The so-called *Sanatan Sikhi*, wherein worship of Hindu gods and goddesses, Sakhi Sarwar, Guga Pir, Devi worship, primitive approach to the Holy is permitted, do not find any *locus standi* in the *Sikhi* of Guru Nanak. Some scholars allege that Singh Sabha fell into the trap of essentialism and thus stopped the intellectual growth of Sikh Panth. They say it forbade the multiple forms of *Sikhi* as the Singh Sabha interpretation took into account only the Sacred Text but not the lived experience. It is the most dishonest and dangerous suggestion. It will spell doom for the doctrinal originality and social unity of Sikh Panth and ultimately end up in its fragmentation into small groups, cults, and sects.

Doctrinal originality and social unity are crucial for the Sikh identity. We see a political party of the Sikhs has taken over almost all the functions of religious leadership. Instead of commitment and faithfulness towards religious ideals, political convenience takes priority. Article 25 B of the Constitution of India does accept Sikhism as an independent and separate religion. The right-wing Hindutva outfits proclaim that Sikhism is a sect/cult of Sanatan Hinduism. It has floated its organization of the Sikhs, which preaches its own variety of Sikhism. All these factors are a deterrent to the free flow and growth of Sikh identity. Apostasy among the Sikhs is on the rise. Young Sikhs are not enthusiastic about carrying religious symbols in public. In some parts of the world, Sikhs have faced hate crimes. In some countries, their laws do not allow the Sikhs to wear a turban, an integral part of the unique Sikh identity. Resultantly,

motivating the young Sikhs to observe the Sikh code of conduct and preserve their unique religious identity has become more complex.

The Sikhs are spread all over the world. They are a minority in every country of their residence. Being a minority community, the Sikhs are prone to the cultural influence of the majority community. The young Sikhs residing in foreign lands are sandwiched between the two cultures, affecting their development of personality. The Sikh scripture is written in the Gurmukhi characters of the Punjabi language. Most of the sources of Sikh history, religion, and literature are also in the same script. However, the Sikhs residing outside Punjab lack skill in the Punjabi language. Therefore, there is a risk that authoritative and authentic understandings of Sikhism will be beyond the reach of many Sikhs, which will spell doom for the Sikh identity. Thus, to preserve and protect the Sikh identity, the Sikhs have to shun personality cult and indulgence in ritualism as promoted by some of the so-called holy saints. In addition to that, the Sikhs need to work out a strategy to strengthen their doctrinal originality and social unity while living in a multi-cultural environment.

Q. Recently, some scholars have coined a new classification in religious studies, namely the Abrahamic religions and Dharmic religions. How would you evaluate this type of classification?

Dr. Dhillon: For a long time, the classification of world religions into two major traditions, the Semitic and the Indian, was an accepted practice. Recently, some organizations have proposed a new classification of Dharmic and Abrahamic traditions. The exponents of this idea argue that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share their common origin from Abraham; thus, they belong to the Abrahamic tradition. Among the religions of Indian origin viz. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, the Dharma (essential values) is a common thread that binds them together; therefore, it is justified to place them under the Dharmic tradition. Furthermore, they argue that the word 'Religion' does not explain the whole connotation of the word 'Dharma,' which is the chief feature and concern of the religions of Indian origin; thus, to call them Dharmic is more appropriate. It has evoked considerable interest and criticism as well.

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The above classification lacks a comprehensive approach towards the study of world religions. For example, it excludes primitive religions, ancient civilizations, such as the Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Indus-Valley, Chinese, Inca, besides religions like Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, etc. Therefore academically, it is a wrong approach. I feel we should avoid categorizing the world religions into Abrahamic and Dharmic traditions. The reason being that instead of furthering the cause of love, goodwill and amity, it will divide the world community into two different and opposite civilizational blocks, which is not in the interest of humanity at large.

Agreeably, the word 'religion' does not explain the entire concept of Dharma. Still, all the world's religions constitute three essential elements: Doctrinal, Devotional, and Sociological expressions. In the Indian context, one of the several meanings of Dharma stands for critical ethical/moral values that are a must for developing an ideal personality and healthy society. We see all the religions stand for higher values, namely love, righteousness, goodwill, honesty, justice, charity, selfless service, etc., which are universal. The very idea that only the religions of Indian origin are of Dharmic character because they profess higher values whereas all other religions are devoid of higher values; and are of un-Dharmic nature academically does not sound well. Undoubtedly, every religion has contributed in its own manner to the advancement of human civilization. Significantly, each religion of Indian origin has its unique concept of Dharma. It is not the same as that of the Vedic religion or Hinduism. Though Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism originated and flourished in India, they do not subscribe to the Sanatan variety of beliefs, world-view, caste-based theory of social order, devotional practices, rites, and ceremonies. These religions originated in India, yet there is no commonality from a doctrinal, sociological, and devotional standpoint. We must acknowledge the uniqueness of every religion of Indian origin. Putting up these religions under the Dharmic tradition is no less than denying the fact that these religions are separate religious entities. The coining of a new category of Dharmic tradition seems to be an intellectual exercise that desires to place all the religions of India under the umbrella of the Sanatan Hindu Dharma, ultimately leading to the hegemony of Hinduism over these religions. For the multi-cultural and multi-religious character of society, it does not augur well.

Dr. Singh: What is a religious/spiritual experience? Can you please share your understanding of Guru Nanak's experience of the Divine?

Dr. Dhillon: You may call it religious, spiritual, sacred, or mystic experience, but it denotes a tendency that forms the core of all world religions. Its nature is wholly other, which is beyond speculation. It relates to the realization of God in inner self or Union with the Divine, which is not ordinarily perceived. It may be realized/experienced personally but can not be explained/described in its totality or transmitted from one person to another. Rudolf Otto, the world-famous exponent of religious experience, calls it “numinous” and defines its three features: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, i.e., it is wholly other experienced with wonder and evokes a response of awe and fascination. Joachim Wach explains it with the help of four criteria, namely (i) Religious experience is a response to the Ultimate Reality; (ii) Religious experience is a total response of the total being/personality to the Ultimate Reality; (iii) Religious experience is the most intense experience of which human being is capable; and (iv) Religious experience is practical, that it involves a commitment which results in creativity. It is a blissful experience that is always refreshing. It is a journey from the mundane to the Spiritual domain, which can transform the ‘Sick Soul’ into a ‘Healthy Soul.’ In the Sikh parlance, we can say that instead of pessimism, it results in Chhardi Kala. According to Joachim Wach, the genuine religious experience enfolds itself into definite attitudes and different forms of expression, namely, Doctrinal expression (beliefs/teachings), Devotional expression (purpose, ways, and means), and Sociological expression (social behavior or relationship). Naturally, all the living religions constitute these three essential elements complementary to each other.

To explore the social dimensions, sociologists invariably follow Max Webber to define it in terms of ascetic, mystic, and prophetic. An ascetic in his spiritual pursuit works on the discipline of mind and body and withdraws socially and psychologically from the family and society through asceticism, meditation and solitude. Concerned only with personal enlightenment, an ascetic adopts an attitude of negation towards the social order. Mystic walks on his spiritual journey like an ascetic but works for the enlightenment of others. A mystic usually accepts the decadent social order as it and rarely advocates for a change in it. The prophetic experience has been found radically different from both the ascetic and the mystical

experiences. It neither involves withdrawal from the world and society nor accepts the social order as it is. According to Max Webber, "the genuine prophet preaches, creates or demands new obligations." The prophetic experience involves a sense that one is serving as a divine agent to challenge the evil social order in the name of God. It always emphasizes criticism and revision of the social order. It involves a call for a struggle to eradicate it and establish a new social order based upon justice and equality. The advent of a prophet always results in the founding of an afresh world of ideals. The desire to see his religious experience transformed into reality is always supreme in the scheme of things of a prophet. The prophetic experience is the highest form of religious experience, which usually results in the establishment of a new social order.

An analysis of Guru Nanak's sacred Bani makes it abundantly clear that he intensely felt himself to be an intermediary or agent of the Divine. Though he never claimed himself to be an incarnation of God, he certainly acted like a mouth-piece of God, through whom Divine Will find expression in the Word (*Sabd*), i.e., the Bani. Once on being questioned by the Nath-Siddhas, the Guru had had replied: Transcendental Lord, the Supreme Essence is the Guru that he had met." He testifies that God has conferred upon him Divine Minstrel's role and calls himself a Divine Drummer at another place. He reiterates, "Whatever the wisdom O Lord you reveal, So I speak. I am ignorant, have no power to speak. Whatever you like O God, so I express." Guru Nanak had no scripture other than the revealed Gurbani. All these utterances show that Guru Nanak's experience of the Numinous experience was radically different from that of the Bhakts/Sants of Sant Tradition. He stood in direct relationship with God, addressed the people in the name of God, and claimed Divine sanction conferred upon his mission.

As discussed above, a prophet does not compromise with the evil forces but serves as a Divine agent to challenge the evil social order, including politics. Similarly, instead of compromising with the decadent social order, Guru Nanak's mandate was to eradicate evil from all walks of life. Like a genuine prophet, neither did he preach renunciation of the society and the world, nor did he accept the existing social order as it was. On the contrary, he unequivocally criticized the contemporary evil social order, whether social, religious, or political. He propounded a new set of ideas to bring about a radical change in the prevalent social order. He put them into practice by establishing the institutions of Guruship, Sangat, Langar and

Dharamsala. Resultantly, it transformed his followers' outlook relating to the purpose of human life and their role in society. Thus, we find that three essential elements of a living religion viz. Doctrinal expression, Devotional expression, and Sociological expression had come to exist in relation to Sikhism during Guru Nanak's stay at Kartarpur. The religious experience of Guru Nanak veritably enjoys the status of prophetic experience, which fructified in the establishment of a new social order in the form of Sikh Panth.

Dr. Singh: Karl Marx, the German philosopher, and economist, once said that "Religion is the opium of the people." Do you concur with it or differ, and why?

Dr. Dhillon: Religion is a universal phenomenon. Its tradition is as old as the human history on this planet. All religions have contributed to the development of human civilization. However, the historical experience of humanity reveals that religion is a double-edged sword that may be used either way, i.e., to further the cause of righteousness and welfare of society or as an instrument to spread communal animosities, hatred, and discrimination against others. When used in the service of humanity, then it is Ambrosia; if it serves the cause of evil forces, injustice, exploitation, and the decadent social order, it is no less than the poison or opiate. Therefore, the religions which do not subscribe to the welfare of the people are generally rendered defunct and irrelevant.

Dr. Singh: All the main religious philosophies are many centuries old; do we need these in the present era? Why should people care about these ancient and perhaps outdated philosophies?

Dr. Dhillon: Religious philosophies are the footprints of humanity on the path of civilization, on which it had trodden in its quest to unravel the mysteries surrounding the God, world and man. They provide glimpses into the different stages of the human experience of the Divine. Moreover, these philosophies unfold the contribution of religion in the formation and organization of early society. Their contribution to music, fine arts, language, literature, architecture, moral education, the tradition of knowledge, etc., can not be ignored. The universal values such as truth, righteousness, goodwill, honesty, forgiveness, amity, benevolence, etc.,

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which had been at the center of these philosophies, are still relevant and can inspire the new generations. Not only the saga of success, but they also throw light on the pitfalls and failures of humanity at different stages of its history. We may learn a lesson from them for a futuristic vision.

Dr. Singh: Thank you, Dr. Dhillon, for sparing your valuable time for this interaction. It was wonderful meeting you and listen to your views on various aspects of Sikh history, Sikh philosophy, and interfaith dialogue.

Dr. Dhillon: Thank you very much, Dr. Devinder Pal Singh, for your incisive and thought-provoking inquiry. I appreciate your input and efforts very much.



Dr. Devinder Pal Singh, M.Sc. Ph.D., Director, Centre for Understanding Sikhism, is a Physicist by training, a teacher by profession and a writer by choice. He specializes in writing on scientific, environmental, and religious topics. He has 24 books, 26 chapters in edited books, 25 book reviews, and 22 encyclopedia entries, over 1500 articles, and 70+ TV/Youtube presentations to his credit in these fields, to date. He lives in Mississauga, ON, Canada. Website: c4usikhism.com,